A Queer Strategy of Equivocation

The destabilisation of normative heterosexuality and the rigid binary gender order

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The critique of identity politics has opened up a sceptical attitude towards normative categories and demands for the coherence and stability of sex, gender and sexuality. At the same time reflections on mechanisms of exclusion within emancipatory movements and politics have also gained attention. Thus, not only (hetero-)sexism and homophobia, but also discriminations pertaining to the rigid binary gender order as well as racist discrimination are issues of importance to queer politics. Considering the critique of identity or minority politics, I have come to the conclusion that rather than to proliferate or to dissolve categories of sex, gender and sexuality, it is more promising to render them ambiguous: that is what I call a queer strategy of equivocation.

Nevertheless sexual ambiguity is not progressive or liberating in itself. Instead, we have to realize that queer/feminist struggles against normative identities, a destabilization of binary, heterosexual norms or new forms of gendered or sexual existence are quite compatible with the quest for individualization put forth by neo-liberal forms of domination. Therefore, a strategy of equivocation should include the fight against social hierarchies, inequalities, and normalizations. The task is to consider simultaneously the working of and the intervention into different mechanisms of power; normalizations and hierarchizations, inclusions and exclusions work together, but not always in the same direction or without contradictions.[1]

From the critique of identity to queer politics of representation

There is a question which has inspired my queer/feminist work for quite a while now: that is, how can we think - and live - sex, gender, and sexuality in ways that are not always bound up with or recaptured by the rigid binary gender order and normative heterosexuality. This is also a question about the cultural repertoire of representations of gender and sexuality as well as about possibilities of changing and rearticulating dominant representations. If there are reflexive relations between cultural representations, lived and embodied subjectivities, and social institutions, a "politics of representation" is full of promise, because it allows us to intervene at all levels of this dynamic interconnection.[2]

What do I mean by a politics of representation? Definitely not lobby

politics or speaking in the name of somebody or expressing certain interests which are said to be grounded in a given identity or experience. Rather, a politics of representation is developed as an alternative to identity or minority politics. It starts from a poststructuralist view, which emphasizes the productivity of cultural images, discourses, and representations within social relations of power. From this point of view, representations do not describe a pregiven reality, nor do they express a truth, but rather produce meanings and construct realities or identities.[3]

This is what Michel Foucault has in mind when he says that sexuality is a product of historical relations of power and knowledge (Foucault 1978). Further, this is what inspires Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of sex and gender (Butler 1990; 1993). According to her, there is no natural sex, no definite point of reference that defines sex or gender. Rather, sex or gender are an effect of an ongoing repetition of social norms: discourses within power relations, namely those of normative heterosexuality and phallocentric logic, that materialize in time thanks to individual and social practices.[4] From Butler's point of view, representation bound up in regimes of power has an intensely stabilizing and reproductive effect: "The domains of political and linguistic 'representation' set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended" (1990, 1/2). Representation, in this sense, functions so well because its productive moment, for which Butler uses the term performativity, is covered up by a descriptive claim of representation, which suggests that it expresses a pregiven reality.[5] If we focus on gender and sexuality, it is the distinction of two - exclusive and excluding - sexes, which are said to express themselves in certain genders and desires in order to form coherent and stable gender identities that function as the stabilizer of normative heterosexuality and gender hierarchy.[6]

While Butler is interested in how representation and a normative demand for "identity" form an alliance that supports regimes of power, I am more interested in whether and how representation can subvert the principle of identity.[7] This is where the "strategy of equivocation" comes into play. I understand the strategy of equivocation as a decisive moment of a politics of representation. It is a strategy that renders ambiguous what used to be clear, that puts into question that which is taken for granted. It does so by rejecting the idea that there could be a definite and stable meaning. It is a strategy that intervenes in the logic of identity. From a queer perspective, this has a political as well as a theoretical dimension which I would like to consider in their connectedness.

Norms, normalities, and hierarchies

Queer politics have developed from a critique of the principle of identity that is at work in minority politics. It has been argued that speaking in the name of a political identity legitimizes exclusions and homogenizes an internal "we".[8] These normative effects of exclusion and inclusion work together very nicely: while there are (open or subtle) exclusions of those who do not fit the norm of a classified group, those who either aim to or even are privileged to belong to this group also undergo ongoing (self-)normalizing regulation. The mechanisms of classification and definition of social identities support discrimination and oppression, even while they are used to fight for rights, recognition and integration.

Apart from this, demands for recognition and integration of "minorities" affirm a "majority" as the defining centre. Take, for example, the newly established "gay-and-lesbian-marriage" rights in Germany. What is installed is a special, but minor "homosexual" substitute to the traditional marriage, which keeps this heterosexualized institution intact and accepts it as the defining model (Bubeck 2000). A hierarchy between hetero- and homosexuality, as well as its defining categories of sexual orientation, are secured. Further, both institutions are based on and enforce the binary distinction of two sexes. So, from a queer perspective one would ask first of all: why not open up marriage for anyone who desires to enter this contract, independently of sex, gender, sexuality, nationality, race, religion, or whatever has traditionally been used to regulate marriages? Also, concerning measures against hierarchies, one would fight the state sponsored privileges that marriage enjoys compared to other forms of sexual partnership and love relations.[9] And last not least exactly those ideological interconnections between marriage, love, reproduction, and sex can be troubled, reworked or broken up.

Another field where queer politics try to subvert the power of a "defining centre" and rather equivocate norm(alitie)s are the medical, juridical, and social regulations of trans- and intersexuality (GLQ 1998; polymorph 2002). Fighting against discrimination does not have to mean fighting for the recognition of special interest groups or identities. For example, rather than demanding another legal category for intersex or transgender persons, a queer political strategy rejects any marking of sex in birth certificates or identification papers.[10] The argument is that any marking imposes a normative restriction - though, of course, some of them are positively sanctioned and promise social privileges while others are devalued or even socially unlivable. Thus, in order to develop political strategies one has to keep in mind that there are two different mechanisms of power at work: normativity and hierarchization

intersect with each other and have to be adressed in their interconnections.

It is not only hierarchies, but also norms and normalizations that support regimes of power and domination. These distinctions are crucial, especially today, where within a neoliberal logic we find new forms of hierarchization which do not depend on social classifications or status groups. Rather, they follow individualized criteria like education, health, flexibility, efficiency to install social distinctions, criteria that harmonize very well with a critique of normative regulations and battles for personal freedom; criteria that support a privatized individuality by subverting political solidarity.[11] On a more abstract level, we have to conclude that the normative effects of classifications are not an isolated problem, but one to be analyzed in the context of social mechanisms of hierarchization.

A queer strategy of equivocation

If we want to find out how classifications and hierarchizations work together, we have to understand how the principle of identity - the "demand" for stable and coherent identities of meaning and materiality - relates to binary logic. Binary logic is a specific way to think difference, namely: one term is declared the defining center, the universal (call it: "the phallus," "the hetero-norm," ...), so that difference can only be thought in relation to the defining center, as "deviant from" or as "other." There is only A or non-A (Jay 1981). My point is that within a binary logic the principle of identity is used to set up a hierarchy. This is the logic at work within a hierarchized binary gender order. This is the logic from which minority or identity politics do not escape. But how, then, can one avoid the impasses of minority and identity politics? How is it possible to gain rights and resources or to fight discrimination and violence without producing normative categories of belonging and exclusion?

In order to elaborate on the queer shift of interest from the supposed needs of a classified minority to the "deconstruction" of dominant cultural and political regimes I would like to introduce a strategy of equivocation. A strategy of equivocation does not focus on social identities but on practices, processes as well as relations of power, knowledge and "truth" (Foucault). It tries to subvert those mechanisms that secure the working of a normative heterosexual gender order or any other order which seems to be "natural" or unquestionable. It intervenes into regimes of "normality" and processes of normalization by revealing ambiguity where a single truth is claimed, where a clear line is drawn, or an entity is stabilized. It functions as an answer to the critique of identity politics as it intervenes in the principle of identity. Therefore a queer strategy of

equivocation favors representations and practices, which resist being pinned down to a single meaning, but materialize the processes of the construction of realities and the conditions of power at work in these processes.[12]

This also means that a strategy of equivocation is radically contextual: it does not pose an ideal or a universal aim that would structure the fight or have binding value. Concerning the problem of a rigid binarity, the perspective would not be to multiply or to dissolve sexes and genders or to formulate a new pluralistic gender order, but to deconstruct those contexts that are organized by a normative ideal or a restrictive law. Equivocation is, therefore, not a category that claims a given ambiguity or plurality of genders and desires; nor does it install "ambiguity" as a new ideal.[13] Rather, it opens up a process of permanent reconsideration of those specific "normalities" that form a social context.

Non-normative politics within normative power relations and social hierarchies?

Michel Foucault wrote that his analysis of the present time is always also an historical analysis, unfolding a genealogy of today's discourses, but also anticipating a future which is inscribed - more or less openly, more or less secretly - in its narration (Foucault 1982; 1984). My idea about queer politics is inspired by this anticipatory moment. I do not want to reduce politics to fighting for certain demands or pragmatic aims bound up within a given structure, but I stick to the idea that this structure is constituted (at least in part) by those discourses that tell its story.[14] The way we reflect on and articulate our critique and desires anticipates a certain (sub-)"version" of society, which could be seen as a force in our fight. But how to make sure that this "vision of a version" does not take on a normative form, does not demand loyalty and submission to a common ideal that functions as the defining "law" of "our" politics? According to Foucault, multiple, conflicting discourses and social practices form a dynamic field of power relations. To keep this conflictual dynamic moving, to fight against its stabilization into structures of domination, is a precondition of freedom - freedom, as a social practice, not an abstract ideal (Foucault 1984). Thus, this is not simply a descriptive or analytic approach but one that holds an ethics - a system of values which does not claim universal validity, but rather "demands" the enactment of the particularity of one's own perspective as part of the historical power relations and as responsible for its dynamics. From this point of view, the political aim would not be to gain hegemony or to enforce a universal idea but to secure a heterogeneity without a center and to install conditions of participation which enable us to change the conditions of participation.[15]

Queer politics of representation intervene into the field of social power relations from multiple and heterogeneous, from marginalized and, to a certain extent, even from subaltern positions.[16] Of course, resources and competences do make a difference - in politics of representation as in any other social practice. And, of course, to gain visibility and space for articulation does not automatically lead to influence in decision making. But from the point of view of those who do not enjoy the status of a "political subject," who may even lack social intelligibility - illegalized refugees, for example, or people, who do not fit into the rigid binary gender order of either male or female - a politics that intervenes in the mechanisms of representation allows for public articulation without depending on legitimized political discourses or procedures, or on advocates who speak "for" or "in the name of .â Ś" In this sense, a queer politics of representation tries to open up ways of thinking or living sex, gender and sexuality that are not always bound up to or recaptured by a rigid binary gender order and normative heterosexuality.

This does not mean developing a common idea about or ideal of gender and sexuality, installing another concept of "normality." Nor does it mean individualizing the field and negating the fact that sex, gender, and sexuality are bound up with power relations, with oppression and violence.[17] Rather, the idea is to fight for a non-normative heterogeneity of subjectivities and ways of existence which do not stand next to each other like isolated entities, but are always oriented along the question whether they support or undermine social hierarchies and regimes of normalization. The aim to de-normalize and de-hierarchize social relations and institutions gives us clear criteria for political activism without installing another norm.[18] It opens up the field for strategies that render ambiguous what seemed to be "the truth," that irritate and deconstruct dominant cultural and social regimes. In the fissures and ruptures of those defining centers and dominant regimes we may discover subjectivities and ways of existence whose presence we could not even have imagined. Perhaps it is the confusion of the defining centers that opens up a space for diverse genders and sexualities to live - and to subvert normative sexualities and rigid gender orders.[19]

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[1] For a more detailed elaboration on these ideas see Engel (2002) where I consider the scope and limits of a queer politics of representation as an alternative to minority or identity politics. A strategy of equivocation is to be seen as part of a project of political transformation that aims to destabilize normative regimes of exclusion and homogenization as well as social hierarchies and relations of domination and exploitation. So, from my point of view, queer politics on gender and sexuality cannot be reduced to questions of individual freedom, but demand a restructuring of society.

[2] See Teresa de Lauretis (1987) for her concept of gender as representation and self-representation based on "technologies of gender" within historical power relations. Lauretis also coined the term "politics of representation."

[3] Derrida (1982), Lauretis (1987; 1994), Weedon (1987), Hall (1997).

[4] Concerning the "heterosexual matrix" see Butler (1990, 35-78). Concerning the materialization of repetitive practices see Butler (1993, 9-16). There she also mentions possibilities of transformation: "As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm" (1993, 10).

[5] See also Butler (1993; 187-222), where she undermines expressive by performative concepts of representation.

[6] Butler (1990, 6-25), Butler (1993, 93-119).

[7] See also Derrida (1991), Hale (1998), and Straayer (1996) who asks not to "mistake dominant ideology for all symbolization and

[not, a.e.] to assume that what is unrepresented is unrepresentable." (174)

[8] Butler (1990), Warner (1993), Jagose (1996), Beger (2001), Mizielinska (2002).

[9] For alternative legal forms of partnership and child-care see Cornell (1998) and Schenk in Bubeck (2000).

[10] To avoid classifications and the infliction of normative categories does not mean that, from a queer point of view, one has to give up legal politics; though one should, in fact, understand the law as a field of conflict and permanent debate (Cornell 1998; quaestio 2000).

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[12] For a queer theoretical text that performs this kind of representation see Probyn (1996).

[13] For critical considerations on celebrations of ambiguity in queer theory see Martin (1994), Walters (1996), Deutscher (1997).

[14] Concerning the question how to act politically within this tension see Beger (2001), especially the chapter: "Mind the Gap: Hybrid Relations of Queer Theory and Political Practice."

[15] See also Elam (1994) and Pulkkinnen (1996) for poststructuralist considerations on the political from queer and feminist perspectives.

[16] See Spivak (1988) for the question of articulations and politics from subaltern positions, positions which are not recognized nor representable within dominant cultural orders.

[17] A problem left open by Foucault, though vital from a queer/feminist perspective, is how to differentiate between dynamic power relations, institutionalized forms of domination, and violence as well as how to understand their interconnections.

[18] About the working of those non-normative, but binding criteria see Engel (2002).

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